

PROFESSIONAL PAPER

BERLIN DADA AND HANNAH HOCH

Submitted by

Thia Nevius

Art Department

In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring, 1983

## BERLIN DADA AND HANNAH HOCH

The Dada movement, a nihilistic precursor of Surrealism, mainly stemmed from sensitive, creative individuals who saw the chaos of the world, and cause of World War I, as a result of 19th century bourgeois rationalism. Dada members hoped to expediate the end of the present society by promoting irrational human behavior. Its spread and success was instantaneous reflecting the fact that these attitudes had been in the air for some years. Beginning in Zurich in 1915, it held prominent places in Berlin, New York, Barcelona, Cologne, Hanover and Paris. By the early 20's the movement had dissolved but its viable aspects were absorbed into the Surrealist movement by 1924.

Dada had more pressing concerns with philosophy, psychology, poetry and politics than the plastic arts. The term Dada had already existed before the time in which it was applied to art. The art of this movement was useful as a means of communicating Dada ideas and caused intended shock and disgust for those with prevailing avant-garde artistic ideals. To the Dadaists, the world at the time needed a greater transformation than that which could be achieved on canvas. At its heart, it aimed to reveal the inconsistencies and inanities of conventional beliefs.

In Zurich the Cabaret Voltaire became the meeting and performance place for Dadaists, unified through mutual ideas, inspiration and

enthusiasm. The only female member was Emmy Hennings, others among them being Hans Arp, Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco and Richard Huelsenbeck.

In 1917 Huelsenbeck arrived in Berlin from Zurich and found an atmosphere ripe for Dada ideas. Berlin Dada had a different feeling than Dada in Zurich. In Zurich critical examinations were being made and insults were properly hurled at the "established order" but in Berlin a real revolution was taking place. The context and the city itself was different. The German established order was collapsing and it was directly affecting the people. A mark of anarchism with writers and artists was in the air. A gray hungry Berlin with its military and reactionary politicians was the source of all the things that were criticized.

In 1918 the "Club Dada" was founded though there is some dispute as to who the founder actually was, Richard Huelsenbeck or Raoul Hausmann. Others among the group included Hannah Hoch, the only woman involved, Wieland Hertzfeld, John Heartfield, Walter Mehring, Johannes Baader, and George Grosz. Most of them understood party politics very little. They were naive and enthusiastic and believed the moral and esthetic standards of the time were doomed. They were young people in their 20's who never believed in the justice of the German cause in the war. In their idealism they did not want to be responsible for the predicament they were in and upheld doctrines for a more equitable distribution of wealth, leisure and power.

The Dadaists became known as anti everything. Since art was part of the corrupt bourgeois world they were anti art. In anti art they hoped to find a new way of self-expression. Ironically, they did arouse

much public interest and attention with their shows and performances for which they would collect a fee, and declared themselves against that.

In the search for new ways to shock and disgust, the discovery of the photomontage became very useful. The most significant contribution of the Berlin group was the elaboration of the photomontage, technically photo collage since the images were not montaged in the darkroom. It was an excellent technique to use since it could easily confront a crazy world with its own images and liberate artists by eliminating their need to draw. Mass media provided all the material. The bourgeois could be attacked with its own image by upsetting the scale, transforming figurative forms, and assimilating nonsensical compositions. The term itself implies nonartistic involvement; montage meaning to construct or assemble, "fitting" or "assembly line," from *monteur* meaning "mechanic" or "engineer." It was a new concept using the texture of a mechanical world the cubists had introduced, and extending the photographic processes to illusionism. The photographs were made from the world of machines, yet no machine could compose these pictures.

There is another dispute here and that is who exactly invented it. It is said that George Grosz and John Heartfield, at 5 a.m. one morning, were thinking of new ways to get across their ideas without the usual format which was banned time and again. Their first montage began as a political joke which lead to a conscious art technique. About the same time Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Hoch were vacationing on the Baltic Sea in Gribow. In their rented cottage over the bed hung a picture of Kaiser Wilhelm II surrounded by ancestors and descendants. Pasted below the helmet of one of the grenadiers above the Kaiser was the face of their landlord. There, among his superiors, stood the young



soldier, erect and proud amid the splendor of the world.<sup>1</sup> This gave them the idea to juxtapose photographic images to produce their own provocative ideas. At home they began to arrange photos, fragments from newspapers, magazines, and postcards into extraordinary, forceful compositions.

No matter whose invention it was, they agreed on its use. The technique itself was less important than the ideas that could be generated from it. In this way, they produced posters, poems, flyers and political obscenities or portraits. It satisfied a deep need toward freedom. This method possessed a tremendous power for propaganda purposes. The possibilities were innumerable and each person to use it developed it differently.

Hannah Hoch's aim may be summed up in this quote. "I should like to wipe out the solid borders that we human beings, in our self-confidence, tend to draw around everything without our reach. I wish to demonstrate that little is also big, and big is also little, and that the only thing that changes is the standpoint from which we judge so that all our human laws and principles lose their validity."<sup>2</sup> Photo collage was an excellent tool for her.

She used the photocollage most effectively and for the longest period of time beginning in 1916 when she was 20, throughout her whole life.<sup>3</sup> At the first Dada shows in Berlin she only contributed

---

<sup>1</sup>Hans Richter, Dada Art and Anti Art, Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 114.

<sup>2</sup>Karen Peterson and J. J. Wilson, Women Artists, Harper Colophon Books, 1976, p. 115.

<sup>3</sup>Hugo Munsterberg, A History of Women Artists, Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., Publisher, New York, 1975, p. 133.

photo collages though she worked in several mediums. Her collages were sometimes political, sometimes documentary. Her art contained fragments of her own life, newspaper clippings, bits of letters, autographs, tickets, etc. In one collage she put all the Berlin Dadaists and their friends, in significant poses, into an immense collage which may still be in the Dahlem Art Gallery in Berlin. Her art was satirical, anti-establishment, whimsical or humorous without any particularly deep message. Her concern was to use art to support her personal ideas and experiences, formal constructions as an expansion of her own vision.

She was born in 1896 in Gotha, Germany, to a very bourgeois family. Her father was an insurance executive and discouraged her pursuit of art as a career. He taught her gardening during his lunch hours which later provided her with necessary tranquility and served as an alternative for artistic expression. She may have been encouraged in her artistic endeavors by her mother who painted picture postcards.

In 1912 upon leaving Gotha, she enrolled in the Berlin School of Decorative Art where she learned glass painting, soldering, and craft techniques under Harold Bengen. She became the pupil of Emil Orlik three years later, who taught her woodcut and linoleum block techniques. Under his tutelage, she learned academic painting and near-abstract drawings. He encouraged her enthusiasm for experimentation in style and media. When the school closed because of the war, she moved home but later returned in 1915. It was here in Berlin she met Raoul Hausmann and together they became involved in the Dada Movement at its beginning.

For her, Dada was a better school than an academy, where she was both pupil and teacher. She learned not simply how to do things but, more importantly, a moral philosophy and standards she kept all her life. She played an active role in the club's anti-establishment activities, sharing equally the feelings and attitudes of her male colleagues. Even though she was of a quiet nature and introverted, she was strong and held her own in disagreements and discussions. Her quiet strength was a strong influence on the men around her. Although she said she had no real problems being the only woman in the group, of all the men she associated with, Kurt Schwitters and Hans Arp were the only ones who treated her as a colleague and not as a charming gifted amateur. Most men denied women implicitly of any real professional status.

She was not against marriage and family as some of her work might suggest. She did not glorify the modern woman but rather sympathized with the sufferings of women in general. This may be seen in one of her works, "Bourgeois Wedding." The bride is a veiled mannequin with a very small head suggesting woman as objectified—a uniform, static unfeeling unmoving shape secured upright on a three-legged stand unable to move on her own. A life doomed to dependence and control of another (Fig. 1). The groom is more human but expressionless and stiff. The empty streets in the background and eerie peaked facades tilted this way and that create a lonely, isolated but public feeling. The irony of a wedding here is portrayed as a cold, joyless, lonely event. Perhaps the pepper mill and heating stove (fireplace, hot water heater...?) are placed there as domestic symbols of chores after marriage? A small plant form pops forth out of the

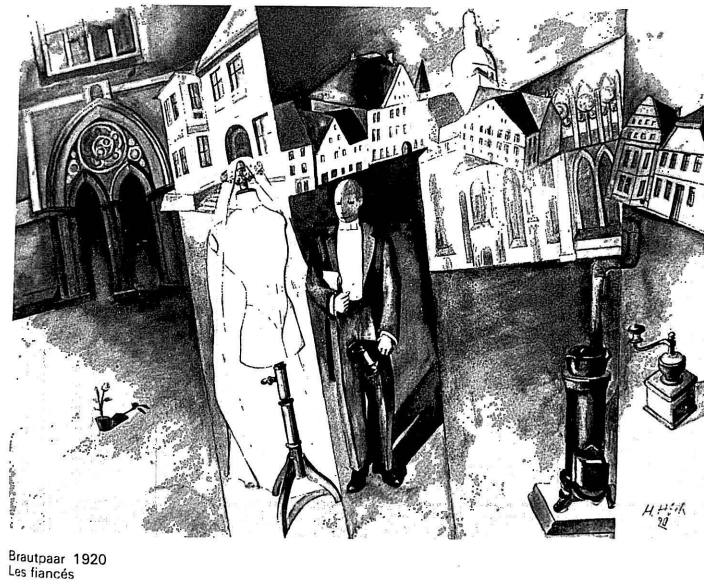


Fig. 1. "Bourgeois Wedding," 1920, watercolor and gouache.

pavement—a symbol of life as a struggling seed? There are many symbols here that could be interpreted in various ways.

Raoul Hausmann had a definite domineering influence on her life. She describes her seven-year relationship with him as long and painful. He was a fiery young poet, painter, and philosopher with a temperamental nature and gifted with a great capacity for fantasy and inventiveness. I suspect the stormy nature of their relationship had something to do with the contradictions between his views and hers. On the one hand he held theories of the liberated woman, but on the other he thought they shouldn't necessarily take an active part in shaping history! He had a restless spirit and needed constant encouragement in order to carry out his ideas. She would have achieved more herself had she not devoted so much time and energy toward him.<sup>4</sup>

Hannah met Kurt Schwitters in 1918 at his first show and began a long lasting friendship with him and his wife. She and Schwitters worked and traveled well together without interfering with each other's work. In 1924 they worked on an "anti-revue" show where she made whimsical puppets for this theater production (Fig. 2). Together they took walks and painted naturalistic landscapes. He devoted several rooms in his first Merzbilder to her and sometimes included her in his MERZ publication. She encouraged him a great deal.

Feelings of frustration, cynicism and humor must have run high at this time. Throughout the early 20's she created works of a more abstract nature using clothing patterns, netting, snaps, zippers, etc. (Figs. 3, 4 and 5). These were perhaps inspired by Schwitters' use

---

<sup>4</sup>Edouard Roditi, Arts, "Interview with Hannah Hoch," volume 34, December 1959, p. 27.



Fig. 2. Hannah Hoch with her Dada puppets, 1920.

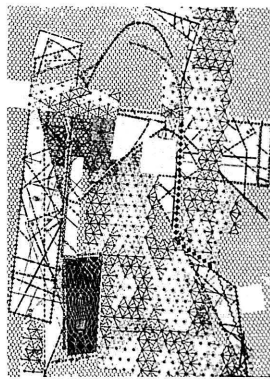


Fig. 3. "Collage," 1923, collage.

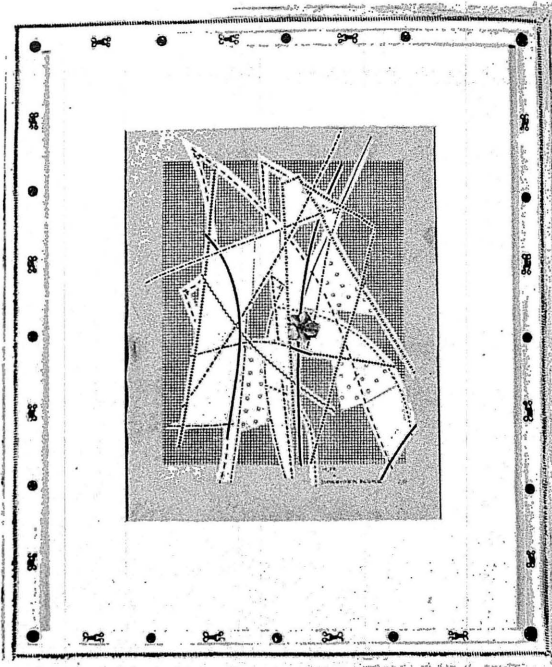


Fig. 4. "Tailor's Daisy" or "Tailor's Flower," 1920, collage.



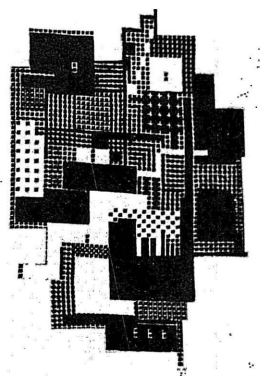


Fig. 5. "Collage," 1925, collage.

of materials associated with craftspeople in his collages which he called MERZ. This follows the Dada ideals of using so-called mundane, lower status materials to create works of "fine art."

She had a good friendship with Hans and Sophie Tauber Arp who stayed with her when they were vacationing in Berlin from France. Of Hans she said he was one of the most creative people she had ever met. They worked together on a series of photomontages in 1923.<sup>5</sup> Influences on each other can clearly be seen (Fig. 11).

In the late 20's and in 1930 a simplification of image and ground seems to be of concern in her work. Single figures are seen against a plain background (Figs. 6 and 7). Perhaps a reckoning or acceptance was taking place within her, not that the images are any less intense or shocking. She was possibly influenced here by Arp's simplicity but still felt compelled to make more of a statement with figurative images.

It may seem odd since their work and personalities are quite different, but she knew Mondrian well and was closely connected to the DeStijl movement. She was never at ease around him as his life was all reasoned and calculated. He was a compulsive neurotic who could never tolerate anything out of order. She was capable of appreciating his style, but for herself she needed more freedom than to view painting with such a narrow interpretation.

Mondrian and the austerity of the DeStijl movement's influence can be seen in collages she did in 1925 (Figs. 5 and 8). The flat,

---

<sup>5</sup> Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, Women Artists 1550-1950, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1976, p. 307.

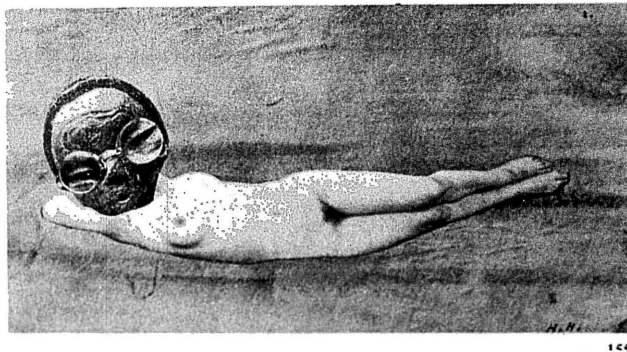


Fig. 6. "Foreign Beauty," 1929, collage.



Fig. 7. "The Tamer," 1930, collage.



7

Fig. 8. "Rhythm," 1925, collage.

rectilinear patterns and shapes create a design effect reminiscent of Mondrian's compositions of 1919 and 1920. In Hock's designs we see much more activity and busyness and play of linear patterns.

She was also friends with Maholy Nagy who came to Berlin after World War I. They had a warm friendship of 15 years. They shared similar ideas but when he went to Weimer to join the Bauhaus, she moved to Holland and they lost touch.

A strong influence on her life was Til Brugman, a writer and poet whom she met through Kurt Schwitters in Holland. Hannah moved here shortly after the war and after the break-up of the Berlin Dada. Apparently, Til had a very strong, satiric personality that attracted her. They lived together for 9 years. Of those years together she describes them as fantastic, the most fun of her life. They did many things together and collaborated on crazy ideas. Although afterward she said her own personality suffered and she had to find herself again since Til was so overpowering at times.

Hannah was obviously not one to follow the crowd. She was highly respected for this, a quiet strength among the explosive actions of her friends. She was decidedly more diversified than the men around her with her avid explorations of photo collages, watercolors and oil paintings. She was ahead of her time in the use of numbers as images with her series of abstract watercolors built around the figure 5, begun in 1919. As early as 1915 she was doing abstract compositions, in the same manner as Kandinsky a few years earlier in Munich.<sup>6</sup> Most of the artists in Berlin at this time were still figurative like the Die Brucke

---

<sup>6</sup>Roditi, Arts, p. 24.

and Fauvists. She experimented in abstract black and white compositions as late as 1926. One of these was reproduced as an ornamental tailpiece to Ernest Hemingway's "A Banal Story" in an issue of the American "Little Review."

She continued to work simultaneously in various media, producing several series: one, ethnographic collages, and another, symbolic landscapes. At one point she took her own photographs that she used for her photo collages. She became interested in primitive art when she visited the Leyden ethnographic museum in 1927. Her photo collages at this time were probably an attempt to escape the preoccupations of the contemporary world by combinations of primitive and modern images (Figs. 9 and 6).

Hannah moved to a remote part of Berlin, Heiligensee, in 1938 just before the war. She was much too conspicuous and knew she was being watched constantly by the Gestapo and occasionally condemned by untrustworthy neighbors. When she had enough money she bought a little house of her own where nobody knew her and her lurid past as one of the Dadaist leaders.

She must have felt an acute loneliness as did everyone living under the Nazi dictatorship. Those who were still remembered as having been a "Cultural Bolshevist," as they were denegratingly called, were black-listed. Each avoided associating with their oldest and dearest friends. By 1938 most of the former Dada leaders had emigrated and she was the only really active member left. When she left Berlin she took all her work and other documents with her, an incriminating life's work. She managed in this way to overcome and survive the terrible years of Nazi power and secretly continued to work in isolation.



Photo montage (1928).

Fig. 9. "Photo Montage," 1928, collage.



Since 1946 she had eleven one-woman exhibitions in Berlin, Milan, Rome, Turin, London and Cassel. In 1947 she introduced colored photographs into her photomontage work. She continued to experiment in this way, working mainly in oil and collage, often employing themes relating to current events.

Hannah lived until 1971, an energetic, slender, gray-haired woman surrounded by pictures and memories of the past as well as by her luxurious garden profuse with flowers, trees and vegetables.

She continually searched for new methods and styles, receiving unjust criticism for not being consistent. A definite correlation can be seen between her paintings and collages as the former often have the look of being cut out forms pasted on a surface (Figs. 1 and 12). Continuity I feel lies in her Dada ideas and practices and in her strong powerful imagery of which there is a wide variety. For me, her work holds an underlying rudiment of sensitization toward the human condition. It seems to be personal and yet have a universal appeal.

Some of her work has a flavor of Surrealism in common with Giorgio de Chirico, a terrifying dream world nightmare. Or Max Ernst imagery as in "Dada Ernst" (Fig. 10). Others are more cheerful and retain a floating quality reminiscent of Marc Chagall (Fig. 6). Throughout it all she displays an optimistic faith in the power of art.

Perhaps her foremost artistic preoccupation was a serious concern with the effort of communicating her personal experience and feelings through humor, satire, and irony always retaining a strong sense of ideals and values.

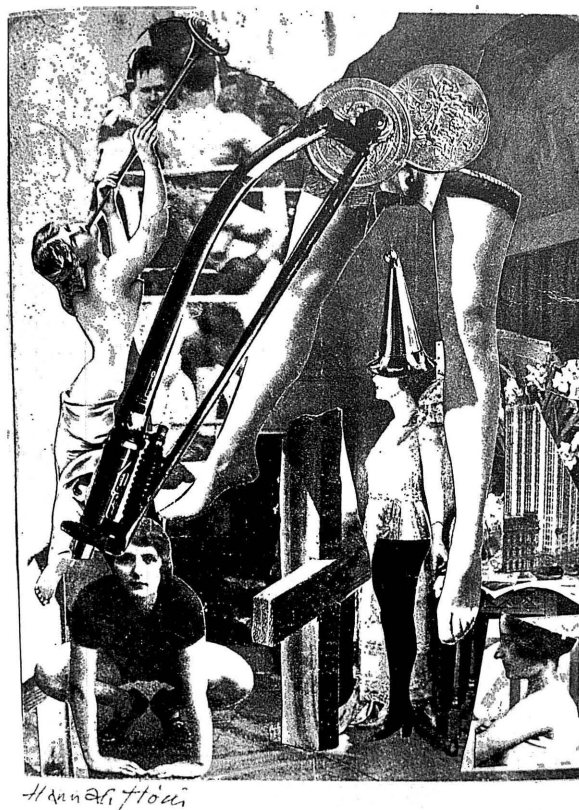


Fig. 10. "Dada Ernst," 1920-1921, collage.

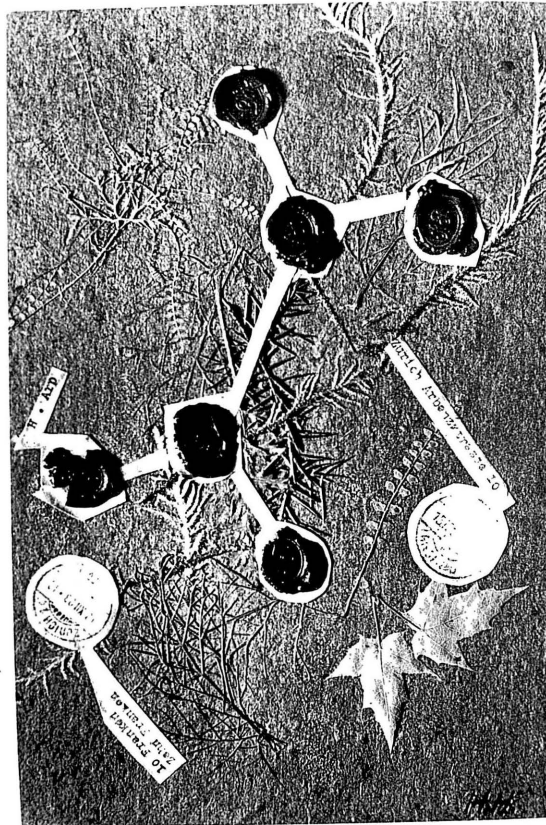


Fig. 11. "Homage to Arp," 1923, collage.

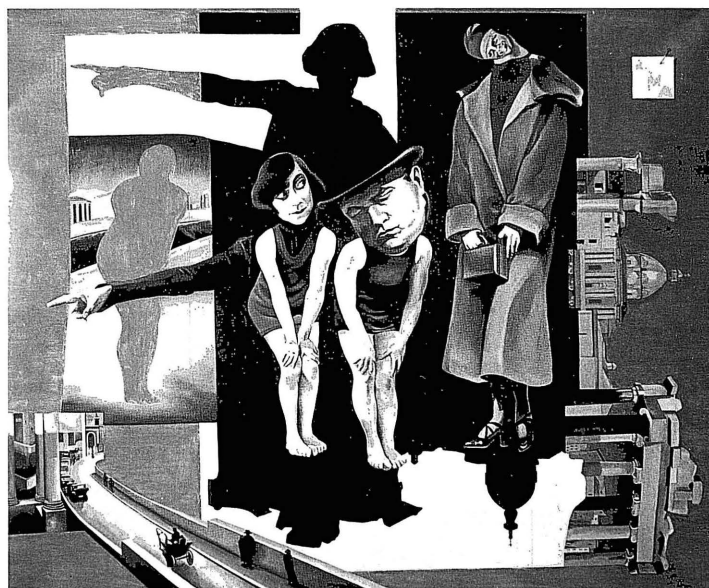


Fig. 12. "Rome," 1925, oil.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ades, Dawn, Photomontage, Pantheon Books, New York, 1976.
- Bachmann, Donna G. and Piland, Sherry, Women Artists: An Historical Contemporary and Feminist Bibliography, Scarecrow Press, Inc., London, 1978.
- Grohmann, Will, Hannah Hoch, Marlborough Fine Art, Ltd., London WI, 1966, cat. no. 178.
- Harris, Ann Sutherland and Nochlin, Linda, Women Artists 1550-1950, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1976.
- Munsterberg, Hugo, A History of Women Artists, Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., Publisher, New York, 1975.
- Ohff, Heinz, Hannah Hoch, Gebr. Mann Verlag, Berlin, 1968.
- Peterson, Karen and Wilson, J. J., Women Artists, Harper Colophon Books, 1976.
- Picard, Lil, Women Artists Newsletter, "Hannah Hoch in Berlin Now," volume 3, May 1977.
- Richter, Hans, Dada Art and Anti Art, Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Roditi, Edouard, Arts, "Interview with Hannah Hoch," volume 34, December 1959.
- Roditi, Edouard, Apollo, "Surrealism: Jubilee or Jamboree?" volume 79, May 1964.
- Tubingen (BDR), Junsthalle, Hannah Hoch: Fotomontagen, Gemälde, Aquarelle, Exh. 23, Feb. - 4 May 1980. 240 p. 197 illus., bibl., biogs., exh. list. German text. DM24.80.